

AG WORK FORCE

The U.S. fruit and vegetable industry is in crisis due to an ever-worsening shortage of labor. There is a critical need to reform our broken immigration system and help build a legal and reliable workforce. While Congress has come close several times to addressing this issue, fear and politics have always intervened. **Long-term, we must have a twofold labor solution** – a pathway to legal status for our valued undocumented workers already engaged in agriculture, and a new guest-worker program adequate to bring in skilled agriculture workers in our labor-intensive industry.

The reality of our farm labor force is that most are foreign-born and as many as 75 percent are falsely documented. In addition, this population is aging, without replenishment. The number of full-time equivalent field and crop workers in the U.S. fell by at least 146,000 – more than 20 percent – between 2002 and 2014. A report from the Pew Research Center found that 140,000 more Mexicans left the U.S. than entered the country between 2009 and 2014.

While many bills dealing with parts of the problem have been introduced in both the House and Senate, Congress has not taken action on meaningful immigration policy changes in nearly four years. However, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte has indicated he will move legislation to develop a new guestworker program through his committee this September. Despite the rhetoric we often hear, there may actually be movement.

United Fresh supports Chairman Goodlatte's effort to move a bill out of the Judiciary Committee, while acknowledging this measure needs improvements. We simply cannot afford to pass up an opportunity to get reform legislation moving, and will continue to work with both House and Senate leaders to shape any legislation as it moves through the process.

Any effective solution must include the following:

- **Transition falsely documented workers to a legal status under appropriate conditions.**
- **Create a workable new guest worker program that addresses the needs of labor intensive agriculture without unreasonable limitations on visas.**
- **Does not implement mandatory e-verify until after both parts of this immigration solution are fully implemented.**